

What Kind of Digital Citizen?

A Reflection on Educating for Digital Democracy

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In order to best prepare a democratic citizenry, one must closely examine the education students are receiving. Educators must ask themselves, what kind of citizen are we helping to create? As the world becomes increasingly digital, one must also examine how students are being prepared to be digital citizens. The following reflection on digital democracy will draw connections between the practices of educating a democratic citizenry and the current deficits of digital citizenship education. It will seek to inspire those teaching digital citizenship to expand their narrow lens in order to create a more participatory and analytic digital citizen.

In *What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating Democracy*, Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne identify three categories of citizenship. The authors describe: personally responsible citizens, participatory citizens, and justice oriented citizens. Arguably the lowest level of citizenship, personally responsible citizens are only concerned and engaged at the individual level. Personally responsible citizens are described as hardworking, honest, and moral. They might demonstrate citizenship by, “picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws, and staying out of debt” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 39). In contrast, a participatory citizen is a more collaborative and active member of society. Participatory citizens “engage in collective, community-based efforts” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 39); they readily participate in government and community organizations. The last category of citizenship is justice-oriented. This level of citizen is motivated to “solve social problems and improve society... [they] question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 38). This citizen goes beyond the individual and community level, to analyze, critique, and challenge the status quo. It is evident

from the reading that each category of citizen is unique, yet all are essential to the function of an ever-evolving democratic society.

When I read *What Kind of Citizen*, I could not help but make connections between educating for democratic citizenship, and educating for digital citizenship. I help run a teaching certificate program in the School of Education at Loyola Marymount University. The program is aimed at converting teachers' instructional practice from traditional direct-instruction to modern student-centered, technology-enhanced instruction. As part of the certificate's curriculum, I instruct teachers on digital citizenship, or "norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use" (Common Sense Media). The aim of this instruction is to create teachers ready to safely and responsibly engage students in the digital world. Digital Citizenship encapsulates a wide range of topics including: internet safety, privacy and security, digital relationships and communication, cyberbullying, digital footprints, self-image and identity, creative credit and copyright, and information literacy (Common Sense Media). When I viewed digital citizenship through the lens offered by Westheimer and Kahne, it was clear that current digital citizenship training is solely focused on creating personally responsible digital citizens. Skills at the personally responsible level are important for a functioning democracy and a working digital world. However, they are only focused on the individual and subsequently very narrow scope. I believe by concentrating solely on this level of digital citizenship educators are doing students a disservice for their future digital lives.

What kind of digital citizen could be created if efforts were concentrated on participation or justice? My vision of a participatory digital citizen is one that enables individuals to use their personal beliefs to engage online. A participatory citizen knows how to harness the power of social media and online systems to actively engage in communication, collaboration, and action.

A participatory digital citizen might utilize Facebook to learn about upcoming protests (such as how many individuals learned of the *Women's March* in 2016). They may start collaborative online groups to engage in political discourse (such as the infamous *Pantsuit Nation* group). A participatory digital citizen may alternatively utilize their personal beliefs as motivation not to participate online. They may choose not to engage on Twitter because of the company's lack of action in regard to hate-speech; or they may choose to remove themselves from Facebook over the company's questionable data sharing and privacy policies. A participatory digital citizen would be able to analyze the digital landscape and utilize digital tools in order to reflect their views.

A justice-oriented digital citizen would be able to further analyze the digital environment. If students were prepared for this level of digital citizenship, they would be able to positively impact the digital landscape. A justice-oriented citizen would be knowledgeable of concepts like net-neutrality, and personal data mining by online companies. They would understand how these systems and practices result in digital injustice. Justice-oriented digital citizenships would be able to identify unfair online structures and advocate for others. They would seek to address the injustices in those areas through collective action. A digital landscape with justice-oriented digital citizens would be one that is more equal for all digital users.

As educators seek to create a more informed and active democratic citizenry, they must also prepare students to be greater digital citizens. Current instruction on digital citizenship is focused at the personal responsibility level. Educators should also draw from the categories of democratic citizens and help to create more participatory and justice-oriented digital citizens. The result to the digital world would be one more fit and better prepared for the future.

References

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